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## Yugoslavia: Will New Minority Rights Law Improve Plight Of Roma?

By Alexandra Poolos

A new government in Yugoslavia has not lessened the attacks on Roma in Serbia and Montenegro. But a new national minority rights act recently passed in parliament gives Roma official minority status. Activists are hoping the new law will improve the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Roma living in the country.

Prague, 22 March 2002 (RFE/RL) -- Enacted in January, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities upgrades the status of Roma living in Serbia and Montenegro to that of a bona-fide national minority.

Official statistics say close to 150,000 Roma live today in Serbia and Montenegro. Minority rights groups place the number much higher, at close to 450,000.

Discriminated against in almost all aspects of life, Roma face limited education opportunities, almost no employment opportunities and a lack of health care or sustainable housing. The majority survive from begging or petty thievery and live in abandoned lots on the outskirts of major towns. In the past two years, some 46 acts of violence against Roma have been officially registered in Serbia and Montenegro, but the real numbers are probably much higher. Racial violence and intolerance in the country reached a pinnacle last February when Dragan Maksimovic, a well-known Belgrade actor, was fatally beaten by a skinhead gang while waiting for a bus in the center of Belgrade. Local media said Maksimovic, a Serb, was attacked because of his dark complexion.

That same month, a cultural center was desecrated with Nazi insignia and anti-Semitic posters after a photo exhibition on Belgrade's Romany community was held in the building.

The plight of Roma in Serbia and Montenegro is exemplified by a group of some 200 Roma living on a plot of land in the industrial outskirts of Belgrade. The group, which includes nine Romany families, has lived sandwiched between abandoned factories in makeshift wooden shacks without running water or electricity for almost 10 years. The group faces a probable eviction on 25 March when a private company, which bought the land, officially moves in.

Tanja Pavlovic is a legal activist with the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Center. She has been lobbying intensely for government intervention and hopes the new minority rights legislation will give these Roma families some leverage in protesting their displacement.

"We are trying to press the government and the Belgrade authorities to find some sort of durable and feasible solution for these people, to provide them land because Yugoslavia accepts obligations from several international instruments concerning protection of housing rights. So what we really want to do is to tell them it is their obligation to provide them some type of accommodation before eviction."

Pavlovic thinks she can persuade the Serbian government to provide temporary housing for the families. But in general, the long-time activist believes little will change for Roma in Serbia and Montenegro despite their new official minority status.

"Governments in Serbia and Montenegro and the federal government, they have a completely resistive approach. It's a sort of hidden racism. In public, they show some kind of interest in solving Roma issues, but in fact they are not doing anything to solve any particular problems Roma face in everyday life. For example, they don't have any willingness to solve their emerging housing problems. They don't have any willingness to solve the problem of internally displaced Roma in Serbia, which are in a completely disastrous situation. It seems to me it is racism in their core."

Pavlovic criticizes the new minority rights law, which will allow Roma to be educated in their own language, for being too soft on discrimination. She says racial violence and intolerance cannot be addressed in Serbia and Montenegro until antidiscrimination laws are enacted.

"We still lack the law addressing discrimination. The [minority] law is a general law, containing kind of general provisions, without any method to combat racism and discrimination in specific cases. The real problem in Serbia and Montenegro is the lack of a feasible way to protect the rights of people faced with discrimination in all fields of life. So the pressing need is enacting a law about combating discrimination."

With the fall of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 and the induction of a new Western-oriented, reformist government, many Roma activists hoped that the situation for the minority would improve. But as in other former Yugoslav republics, ethnic prejudices in Serbia and Montenegro are deeply rooted and little has changed.

Branimir Plese is a lawyer working at the European Roma Rights Center in Budapest. He says conditions for Roma in Serbia and Montenegro have not changed since Milosevic left power.

"Before the change in government, [the Roma] used to suffer police and skinhead violence, attacks. They had problems with forced evictions, with discrimination and access to public accommodations like restaurants, pubs and so on. There was hate speech, and all of that is present now, too. Once the government changed, there were higher expectations that the situation would improve drastically. And unfortunately, it's safe to say that it hasn't, at least in practice. There's still a failure to protect and a failure to investigate reported incidents of Roma rights abuse by the prosecutor's office and the police. And there's still the kinds of violations that used to happen before the change in government."

Plese says the discrimination and violence faced by Roma in Serbia and Montenegro can be found throughout Eastern Europe. Worse, he says, the hatred of Roma remains even in transition countries with improving economies and living standards.

"There are all kinds of attacks and Roma rights violations in different countries, and it doesn't seem to be particularly related to how well they're doing in economics and transitional terms. Some of the countries that are doing [comparatively] well are notorious about the number of incidents of Roma being attacked by skinheads, like, for example, in the Czech Republic."

But there are particular difficulties faced by the Roma in Serbia and Montenegro, especially those from Kosovo, who were forcibly expelled from

the province by ethnic Albanians returning to their homes at the end of NATO's bombing campaign in 1999. At the time, Roma in Kosovo were perceived as Serb collaborators and faced the same violence and discrimination as ethnic Serb villagers. But unlike the Kosovar Serbs, Roma were not given a warm welcome when they fled to Serbia proper. Doubly hated for being Roma and having Albanian names, these Roma found themselves at the bottom of the country's ethnic pecking order.

Pavlovic says Roma from Kosovo living in Serbia faced the combined effects of Serbian war anger and an ethnic nationalism fostered by Milosevic during his 13 years in power.

"Thousands and thousands of Roma from Kosovo fled from Albanian violence to Serbia. They created some kind of humanitarian problem here in Serbia. So maybe this resistive approach is made worse by the Roma from Kosovo, many of whom have Albanian or Muslim names, and many have Muslim religion. So many people in Serbia just transferred the bias they have towards Albanians to these Roma people [who] call themselves Ashkalija, from Kosovo."

And while prejudice against Roma is a deeply rooted phenomenon across Europe, Plese of the European Roma Rights Center says things in Western Europe aren't much better.

"If [Western Europe is] setting an example, it certainly doesn't seem to be a good one. Asylum seekers are an especially good indication of these trends in Western Europe. There are currently several cases pending against Italy regarding collective expulsion of aliens that relate to Roma, where the applicants alleged that their claims have not been fairly dealt with. There's a rather recent European Court decision against Belgium, where the European Court found Belgium in violation of the relevant articles on European convention again in relation to the collective expulsion of aliens, where the applicants were Roma. So there is this mentality of 'Fortress Europe' that shows."

Most Roma asylum-seekers in the West hail from Eastern Europe. Plese says Roma from Serbia and Montenegro are likely to join these ranks, and that most will find little respite from their quest.

"Americans have different ways of saying things. They say "elevator", we say "lift" ... they say "President", we say "stupid psychopathic git."  
Alexei Sayle.

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